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Otis - The Removal of the Municipal
Government to the Old State House - 1830

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November 26, 1917

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AN

ADDRESS

TO THE

MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL,

ON THE

REMOVAL

OF THE

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT,

TO THE

OLD STATE HOUSE.

BY HARRISON GRAY OTIS,
MAYOR OF THE CITY OF BOSTON.

BOSTON:
JOHN H. EASTBURN....CITY PRINTER.

MDCCCXXX.

MS 13176.9.9

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CITY OF BOSTON.

IN COMMON COUNCIL, SEPTEMBER 17, 1830.

Ordered, That the Committee of Arrangements be, and they hereby are, directed to present to the Mayor the thanks of the City Council, for the impressive and eloquent Address delivered by him to the City Council in Convention, on the morning of this memorable Anniversary, and to request a copy of the same for the press.

Sent up for Concurrence,

B. T. PICKMAN, *President*.

In the Board of Aldermen, September 20, 1830.

Read and Concurred.

H. G. OTIS, *Mayor*.

A TRUE COPY—ATTEST,

S. F. M'CLEARY, *City Clerk*.

Boston, September 20, 1830.

HON. H. G. OTIS.

The Undersigned, the Committee of Arrangements for the Centennial Celebration of the Settlement of Boston, have the honor to enclose you an attested copy of a vote of the City Council, and respectfully ask your compliance with the request contained therein.

BENJAMIN RUSSELL,
WINSLOW LEWIS,
BENJAMIN T. PICKMAN,
THOMAS MINNS,
JOSEPH EVELETH,
JOHN W. JAMES,
JOHN P. BIGELOW,
WASHINGTON P. GRAGG.



*Winslow Lewis Tracts
New England Historic Genealogical Society*

ADDRESS.

Gentlemen of the Common Council:

I have the honor to announce to you that the Mayor and Aldermen have concurred with your request to change the name of this building, and to order that it be henceforth called and known by the name of the *City Hall*.

Gentlemen of the City Council,

The intimations which I have received from many individuals of your body, have left me no room to doubt of your general expectation, that this first occasion of our meeting in this Chamber should not be permitted to pass away, without something more than a brief record of the event upon your journals.—The spot on which we are convened is Patriot Ground. It was consecrated, by our pious ancestors, to the duties of providing for the welfare of their infant settlement; and, for a long series of years, was occupied, in succession, by the great and good men whom Providence raised up to establish the institutions and liberties of their country.

There are none, who have paid even a superficial attention to the process of their perceptions, who are

not conscious that a prolific source of intellectual pleasures and pains is found in our faculty of associating the remembrance of characters and events, which have most interested our affections and passions, with the spot whereon the first have lived and the latter have occurred. It is to the magic of this local influence that we are indebted, for the charm which recalls the sports and pastimes of our childhood, the joyous days of youth, when buoyant spirits invested all surrounding objects with the color of the rose. It is this, which brings before us, as we look back through the vista of riper years, past enjoyments and afflictions, aspiring hopes and bitter disappointments, the temptations we have encountered, the snares which have entangled us, the dangers we have escaped, the fidelity or treachery of friends. It is this, which enables us to surround ourselves with the images of those who were associates in the scenes we contemplate, and to hold sweet converse with the spirits of the departed, whom we have loved or honoured, in the places which shall know them no more.

But the potency of these local associations is not limited to the sphere of our personal experience.—We are qualified by it, to derive gratification from what we have heard and read of other times, to bring forth forgotten treasures from the recesses of memory, and recreate fancy in the fields of imagination. The regions, which have been famed in sacred or fabulous history; the mountains, plains, isles, rivers, celebrated in the classic page; the seas, traversed by the discoverers of new worlds; the fields, in which empires have been lost and won, are

scenes of enchantment for the visiter, who indulges the trains of perception which either rush unbidden on his mind, or are courted by its voluntary efforts. This faculty it is, which, united with a disposition to use it to advantage, alone gives dignity to the passion for visiting foreign countries; and distinguishes the philosopher, who moralizes on the turf that covers the mouldering dust of ambition, valour, or patriotism, from the fashionable vagabond, who flutters among the flowers which bloom over their graves.

Among all the objects of mental association, ancient buildings and ruins affect us with the deepest and most vivid emotions. They were the works of beings like ourselves. While a mist, impervious to mortal view, hangs over the future, all our fond imaginings of the things which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard," in the eternity to come, are inevitably associated with the men, the events and things, which have gone to join the eternity that is past.—When imagination has in vain essayed to rise beyond the stars which "proclaim the story of their birth," inquisitive to know the occupations and condition of the sages and heroes whom we hope to join in a higher empyrean, she drops her weary wing, and is compelled to alight among the fragments of "gorgeous palaces and cloud-capp'd towers," which cover their human ruins, and by aid of these localities, to ruminate upon their virtues and their faults, on their deeds in the cabinet and in the field, and upon the revolutions of the successive ages in which they lived. To this propensity may be traced the sublimated feelings of the man, who, familiar with the stories of Sesostris, the Pharaohs, and the Ptolemies,

surveys the pyramids, not merely as stupendous fabrics of mechanical skill, but as monuments of the pride and ambitious folly of kings, and of the debasement and oppression of the wretched myriads, by whose labors they were raised to the skies. To this must be referred the awe and contrition which solemnize and melt the heart of the Christian, who looks into the Holy Sepulchre, and believes he sees the place where the Lord was laid. From this originate the musings of the scholar, who, amid the ruins of the Parthenon and the Acropolis, transports his imagination to the age of Pericles and Phidias;—the reflections of all, not dead to sentiment, who descend to the subterranean habitation of Pompeii—handle the utensils that once ministered to the wants, and the ornaments subservient to the luxury, of a polished city—behold the rut of wheels, upon the pavement hidden for ages from human sight—and realize the awful hour, when the hum of industry and the song of joy, the wailing of the infant and the garrulity of age, were suddenly and forever silenced by the fiery deluge which buried the city, until accident and industry, after the lapse of nearly eighteen centuries, revealed its ruins to the curiosity and cupidity of the passing age.

These remarks, in which you may think there is more of truth than of novelty, have been suggested by the experiment which a few days since I attempted, to condense in the compass of a short address, a few ideas appropriate to this occasion. Beginning to think upon matters connected with the old Town House, I found my mind confused, and overwhelmed with the multitudinous associations of our early his-

tory, which it naturally induced. To indulge them to a great extent, would trench upon the province and the hour assigned to another, whose eloquence will furnish the principal gratification of the day. It is therefore indispensable, to confine myself to a few observations, and consequently to do but imperfect justice to my feelings and the subject.

The history of the Town House, considered merely as a compages of brick and wood, is short and simple. It was erected between the years 1657 and 1659, and was principally of wood, as far as can be ascertained. The contractor received six hundred and eighty pounds, on a final settlement in full of all contracts. This was probably the whole amount of the cost, being double that of the estimate—a ratio pretty regularly kept up in our times. The population of the town, sixty years afterwards, was about ten thousand; and it is allowing an increase beyond the criterion of its actual numbers at subsequent periods, to presume that at the time of the first erection of the Town House, it numbered three thousand souls. In 1711 the building was burnt to the ground, and soon afterwards built with brick. In 1747 the interior was again consumed by fire, and soon repaired, in the form which it retained until the present improvement, with the exception of some alterations in the apartments, made upon the removal of the Legislature to the new State House. The eastern chamber was originally occupied by the Council; afterwards by the Senate. The Representatives constantly held their sittings in the western chamber. The floor of these was supported by pillars,

and terminated at each end by doors, and at one end by a flight of steps leading into State street. In the day time the doors were kept open, and the floor served as a walk for the inhabitants, always much frequented, and during the sessions of the courts, thronged. On the north side, were offices for the clerks of the supreme and inferior courts. In these, the judges robed themselves, and walked in procession, followed by the bar, at the opening of the courts. Committee rooms were provided in the upper story. Since the removal of the Legislature, it has been internally divided into apartments, and leased for various uses in a mode familiar to you all, and it has now undergone great repairs. This floor being adapted to the accommodation of the City Government, and its principal officers, while the first floor is allotted to the post office, news room, and private warehouses.

In this brief account of the natural body of the building, which it is believed comprehends whatever is material, there is nothing, certainly, dazzling or extraordinary. It exhibits no pomp of architectural grandeur, or refined taste ; and has no pretensions to vie with the magnificent structures of other countries, or even of our own. Yet is it a goodly and venerable pile—and with its recent improvements, is an ornament of the place, of whose liberty it was once the citadel. And it has an interest for Bostonians who enter it this day, like that which is felt by grown children for an ancient matron by whom they were reared and whom, visiting after years of absence, they find in her neat, chaste, old fashioned attire, spruced up

to receive them, with her comforts about her, and the same kind, hospitable and excellent creature whom they left in less flourishing circumstances. But to this edifice, there is not only a natural but "a spiritual body," which is the immortal soul of Independence. Nor is there, on the face of the earth, another building, however venerable for its antiquity, or stately in its magnificence—however decorated by columns and porticos, and cartoons, and statues, and altars, and outshining "the wealth of Ormus or of Ind," entitled in history to more honorable mention, or whose spires and turrets are surrounded with a more glorious halo, than this unpretending building.

This assertion might be justified, by a review of the parts performed by those who have made laws, for a century after the first settlement of Boston—of their early contention for their chartered rights—of their perils and difficulties with the natives—of their costly and heroic exertions in favor of the mother country, in the common cause.—But I pass over them all, replete as they are with interest, with wonder, and with moral. Events posterior to those, growing out of them indeed, and taking from them their complexion, are considered by reflecting men, as having produced more radical changes in the character, relations, prospects, and (so far as it becomes us to prophecy) in the destinies of the human family, than all other events and revolutions that have transpired since the Christian Era. I do not say that the principles which have led to these events originated here. But I venture to assert that here, within these walls, they were first practically applied to a well-regulated machinery of

human passions, conscious rights, and steady movements, which, forcing these United States to the summit of prosperity, has been adopted as a model by which other nations have been, and will yet be, propelled on the rail road which leads to universal Freedom. The power of these engines is self-moving, and the motion is perpetual. Sages and philosophers had discovered that the world was made for the people who inhabit it; and that Kings were less entitled in their own right to its government, than Lions, whose claims to be lords of the forest are supported by physical prowess. But the books and treatises which maintained these doctrines, were read by the admirers of the Lockes, and Sidneys, and Miltons, and Harringtons, and replaced on their shelves as brilliant Theories. Or, if they impelled to occasional action, it ended in bringing new tyrants to the throne, and sincere patriots to the scaffold. But your progenitors, who occupied these seats, first taught a whole people systematically to combine the united force of their moral and physical energies—to learn the rights of insurrection, not as written in the language of the passions, but in codes and digests of its justifiable cases—to enforce them, under the restraints of discipline—to define and limit its objects—to be content with success, and to make sure of its advantages.—All this they did, and when the propitious hour had arrived, they called on their countrymen, as the Angel called upon the Apostles, “Come rise up quickly, and the chains fell from their hands.”—The inspiring voice echoed through the welkin in Europe and America, and awakened nations. He who would learn the effects

of it, must read the history of the world for the last half century. He who would anticipate the consequences, must ponder well the probabilities with which time is pregnant, for the next. The memory of these men is entitled to a full share of all the honor, arising from the advantage derived to mankind from this change of condition, but yet is not chargeable with the crimes and misfortunes, more than is the memory of Fulton with the occasional bursting of a boiler.

Shall I then glance rapidly at some of the scenes, and the actors who figured in them, within these walls? Shall I carry you back to the controversies between Governor Barnard and the House of Representatives, commencing nearly seventy years ago, respecting the claims of the mother country to tax the Colonies, without their consent? To the stand made against writs of assistance, in the chamber now intended for your Mayor and Aldermen; where and when, according to John Adams, "Independence was born" and whose star was then seen in the East, by wise men? To the memorable vindication of the House of Representatives by one of its members? To the "Rights of the Colonies," adopted by the legislature as a Text book, and transmitted by their order to the British Ministry? To the series of patriotic resolutions, protests, and State papers, teeming with indignant eloquence and irresistible argument, in opposition to the Stamp and other tax acts?—To the landing and quartering of troops in the town? To the rescinding of resolutions in obedience to royal mandates? To the removal of the seat of Govern-

ment, and the untiring struggle in which the Legislature was engaged for fourteen or fifteen years, supported by the Adamses, the Thachers, the Hawleys, the Hancocks, the Bowdoins, the Quincys, and their illustrious colleagues? In fact the most important measures, which led to the emancipation of the Colonies, according to Hutchinson, a competent judge, originated in this house,—in this apartment—with those men, who, putting life and fortune on the issue, adopted for their motto,

“Let such, such only tread this sacred floor,
Who dare to love their country, and be poor.”

Events of a different complexion are also associated with the Boston Town House. At one time, it was desecrated by the king's troops quartered in the Representatives chamber, and on the lower floor. At another time, cannon were stationed and pointed toward its doors. Below the balcony in King's street, on the doleful night of the fifth of March, the blood of the first victims to the military executioners was shed. On the appearance of the Governor, in the street, he was surrounded by an immense throng, who, to prevent mischief to his person, though he had lost their confidence, forced him into this building, with the cry “To the Town House! to the Town House!” He then went forth into the balcony, and promising to use his endeavours to bring the offenders to justice, and advising the people to retire, they dispersed, vociferating, Home! home! The Governor and Council remained all night, deliberating in dismal conclave, while the friends of their country bedewed their pillows with tears—“such tears

as Patriots shed for dying laws." But I would not wish, under any circumstances, to dwell upon incidents like these—thankful as I am that time, which has secured our freedom, has extinguished our resentments. I therefore turn from these painful reminiscences, and refer you to the day when Independence, mature in age and loveliness, advanced with angelic grace, from the chamber in which she was born, into the same balcony ; and, holding in her hand the immortal scroll on which her name and character and claims to her inheritance were inscribed—received from the street, filled with an impenetrable phalanx, and windows glittering with a blaze of beauty, the heartfelt homage and electrifying peals of the men, women and children of the whole city. The splendour of that glorious vision of my childhood seems to be now present to my view, and the harmony of that universal concert to vibrate in my ear.

Such, gentlemen, is the cursory and meagre chronicle of the men, and the occurrences, which have given celebrity to this building. And if it be true, that we are now before the altar, whence the coals were taken which have kindled the flame of liberty in two hemispheres, you will realize with me the sentiment, already expressed, that the most interesting associations of the eventful history of the age might rise in natural trains, and be indulged and presented on this occasion, without violence to propriety.

We, gentlemen, have now become, for a short period, occupants of this temple of Liberty. Henceforth, for many years, the City Government will

probably be here administered. The duties of its members are less arduous, painful, and dignified, than those of the eminent persons who once graced these seats, and procured for us the privilege of admission to them. Yet let not these duties be undervalued. They are of sufficient weight and importance, to excite a conscientious desire in good minds, to cultivate a public spirit, and imitate with reverence great examples. There is ample scope for dispositions to serve our fellow citizens, in the department of the City Government. It is charged with concerns affecting the daily comfort and prosperity of sixty thousand persons,—a number exceeding that of several of these United States, at the time of their admission into the Union. The results of their deliberations have an immediate bearing upon the morals, health, education, and purse, of this community, and are generally of more interest to their feelings, and welfare, than the ordinary acts of State Legislation. It is a community which any man may regard as a subject of just pride to represent—rivalled by none in orderly and moral habits, general intelligence, commercial and mechanic skill, a spirit of national enterprise, and, above all, a vigilance for the interest of posterity, manifested in the provision made for public education. No state of society can be found more happy and attractive than yours. Many of those who are in its first ranks, rose from humble beginnings, and hold out encouragement to others to follow their steps. There is, so far as I can judge, more real equality, and a more general acquaintance and intercourse among the different vocations, than is else-

where to be found in a populous city. Those of the middling class as respects wealth, the mechanics and the working men, are not only eligible, but constantly elected, to all offices in state and city, in such proportion as they (constituting the great majority) see fit to assign. We enjoy the blessings of a healthy climate, delightful position, and ample resources for prosperity in commerce, manufactures, and the mechanic arts ; all of which, I am persuaded, are at this moment gradually reviving, after some vicissitude from time and chance which happen to all things.— May we, and those who will succeed us, appreciate the responsibility attached to our places, by the merit of our predecessors, and though we cannot serve our country to the same advantage, may we love it with equal fidelity. And may the Guardian Genius of our beloved city forever delight to dwell in these renovated walls !



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